

# Recent Challenges to Data Collection

**Discussant Comments**

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# Overall comments

**The Census Bureau and its staff are to be commended for their methodological adaptations in several annual surveys where data collection was adversely affected by the pandemic**

**Bureau research has also provided evidence of response bias, although much more could be reported, which would be valuable to survey research more broadly**

# **The Current Population Survey Experience 2020/2021**

# Impact of the pandemic

**Response rates dropped sharply in March, April, and May of 2020 as the typical in-person contact of 2 of the 8 rotation groups had to be suspended and replaced with telephone contact**

**While more prospective respondents were at home throughout the day, other factors contributed to a reduction in response rates across federal and commercial surveys**

**By linking administrative records to the housing units of responding and nonresponding households alike, the Bureau was able to evaluate response bias in the 2020 survey relative to the three previous years**

**By applying an alternative weighting method, yielding entropy balance weights (EBW), the Bureau found evidence that responding households had higher income across the income distribution (that is, compared to the survey weights, EBW reduced administrative income)**

**Biases were demonstrated in other characteristics as well**

# Further evaluation

**In addition to investigating the representativeness of the sample, as the Bureau has done, some evaluation of the quality of the responses would be useful in understanding the full impact of the pandemic on survey response**

**The Bureau has previously compared survey income reports to administrative records**

**Repeating such an evaluation for 2018-2021 could tell us if response quality changed**

**Interestingly, the pattern of response bias observed across all households, White and Blacks households is not replicated among Hispanic households**

**Any thoughts on why that may be?**

**Is there a plan to produce experimental EBW estimates for the 2021 survey?**

**Will outside researchers have access to the experimental estimates through the FSRDCs?**

# **The American Community Survey Experience for 2020 Data**

# Problems posed by the pandemic

**The ACS collects data from independent monthly samples**

**While interview month is not released, uniform distribution of collected data over the 12 months in a calendar year is important to the quality of certain annual estimates, where monthly responses reflect seasonality (e.g., migration and labor force participation) or varying 12-month reference periods (income)**

**The ACS is implemented as a multimode survey with an explicit sequence of modes**

**The pandemic disrupted initial mail contact of sample housing units and prevented in-person nonresponse follow-up (NRFU) for several months**

**NRFU operations had to replace in person with telephone—a mode the Bureau had eliminated**

**Average annual response rate dropped to 71 percent—with March through June “significantly lower”—from 86 percent in 2019 and 92 percent in 2018 (and high 90s in earlier years)**

# Consequences and response

**Estimates from 2020 using traditional weighting did not meet Bureau quality standards**

**Consequently, the Bureau will not release the customary annual data products for that year**

**In their place the Bureau will release “experimental” estimates using the alternative weighting methodology investigated with the CPS ASEC**

**In my view this strategy seems appropriate, although it would be helpful to see some estimates on which this judgment was based—both for the 2019 and 2020 data with traditional weights and both years with the experimental weights**

**The Bureau plans to release an analytic report that will presumably contain such detail**

**Current plan is to include traditional 2020 estimates in the 2016-2020 five-year estimates (and, presumably, future five-year estimates)—but contingent on evaluation?**

**Working in favor of this plan is the small contribution of the weakest months of 2020 data**



# Experimental estimates

**With regard to the experimental estimates, I am particularly interested in how the Bureau is dealing with the months from March through June, as this is not an explicit aspect of the EBW methodology**

**Will the months with low response be weighted up to their full shares of the sample?**

**Or will responses be weighted more uniformly across the 12 months?**

**Likewise, what evaluation of the experimental estimates has occurred or is planned?**

**Rothbaum's presentation alludes to experimental estimates for 2019 and 2020**

**Comparisons between 2020 and the prior year would seem to be most informative**

**Comparative assessment should include migration, for which the ACS is a critical source**

# **The Economic Data Survey Experience 2020**

# Impact on economic surveys

**Challenges posed by the pandemic were exceptional for the economic surveys**

**Telework was not common in the National Processing Center**

**Some jobs did not lend themselves to telework**

**Survey respondents typically received mailings at their offices**

**Responding to detailed financial questions often required consulting documents at their offices**

**Response rates suffered**

**Mitigation strategies included increasing use of voicemail and email (with headquarters support), expanding telework capability, and several other accommodations**

**Indicator surveys were prioritized**

**Fielding of small business pulse survey an additional, major accomplishment**

# Partial response to questions

**Two of the three questions posed to the committee focus on respondent issues**

**How significant were these?**

**Presumably, electronic access to financial records was common among many businesses**

**Was telework also well established?**

**Is this primarily a small business issue?**

**Success of small business pulse survey suggests an avenue for learning more**

**With regard to contact strategies, it is apparent that of mail, email, and phone, mail will continue to be the least reliable for many more months**

**Unlike the ACS, the economic surveys have better prospects of developing alternative contact strategies for new respondents (repeat respondents should present little issue)**